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Frothingham - Brooke Herford

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SERMON.

“A beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord.”

EPHESIANS vi. 21.

THESE words are used by the apostle Paul in describing one of his companions and fellow-workers. The name of the beloved brother and faithful minister was Tychicus. It is significant that he is mentioned in five separate books of the New Testament, and more than once with special words of praise and commendation. Paul himself refers to him four times in his various Epistles, and on each occasion in relation to some mission or enterprise on which he was about to send him. When the apostle was undergoing his first imprisonment at Rome, this fellow-servant in the Lord was with him. Thence Paul sent him to Colossæ, commending him to his friends there in almost the same words that he had used in writing to the Ephesians. For he is “a beloved brother,” he tells them, “and a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord: whom I have

sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate and comfort your hearts."

These are brief descriptions, certainly ; and they make us long for further and more accurate information. Yet we safely may infer that this chosen comrade of the great apostle was distinguished for his willing service and abundant Christian sympathy. He was sent on missions of importance where zeal and perseverance were required ; and he was commended because of the comfort, encouragement, and support that he knew so well how to impart.

From those long-distant days until these the line of faithful ministers in the Lord has been steadily continued. Apostolic succession is a spiritual fact. The Christian Church has been justified of her children. The faithful followers of the Master have labored oftentimes along very different lines, and have cherished contradictory beliefs ; but the spirit of their lives has been essentially the same, and their consecration has been drawn from one great Source of life and light. The best evidence of Christianity is the Christian, even as the best evidence of religion is man himself with his quenchless aspirations, and instinctive spiritual longings.

It is right that we should consider here this morning the life and teachings of one who entered gladly and reverently into this line of Christian discipleship and service, and whom the members of this church well know can fitly be described as having been "a faithful minister of the Lord."

The duty of speaking of him here is a privilege and inspiration. Like many another duty, though, it is not wholly free from difficulties; while privilege and inspiration often bring with them a sense of personal insufficiency and weakness. Bear with me, therefore, as I try to bring once more before your minds the character and service of your former minister, and to re-interpret the image of him that many of you treasure sacredly in your hearts and manifest, I must believe, in many of the worthy, generous, loyal actions of your daily lives. What my words shall lack may your memories supply, and where I may have failed to understand let your affections rectify and clothe with even deeper and more tender feelings.

The death of Mr. Herford was not unexpected. To those of us who knew the circumstances and had seen him smitten by weakness, and living but the shadow of his former vigorous self, it was a thing to be desired, and, now that it

has come, to be looked upon as a matter for rejoicing.

“Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail, . . .
Nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.”

He had fought the good fight, he had finished his course, he had kept the faith; and, like the happy warrior at the close of day, it was his to wrap the cloak of a well-spent life around him, and lie down to rest.

The debt that this church owes to Mr. Herford is distinct and very considerable. He must always rank among the noblest and most effective in its long line of able and distinguished ministers. The society was in a weak and almost dejected condition when he came from Chicago to assume the leadership. Indeed, it must have been in much the same “destitute state” that it was when Channing was invited to become the minister. The comparison is interesting and suggestive; for it became Brooke Herford’s task to restore, at least in an outward sense, the glories of Channing’s days of influence and power. Those of you who remember the change that speedily came with his presence here

know something of the magnitude of what he quietly accomplished. We can almost see again the eager, earnest, reverent faces of the people, who looked up to him, and listened gratefully and gladly to his simple, forceful words of practical helpfulness and wisdom.

It was only about a score of years ago * that his ministry began here ; and yet what changes quietly have come to pass in the membership of this old church ! Those who were children then are men and women now, and are able to appreciate the value of the moral and spiritual help he gave them. Those who rejoiced in all the strength and freedom of middle life now find themselves upon the downward slope, where the first signs of the frost and snow of age begin to make appearance ; and those who greeted him already themselves beginning to feel the weight and burden of their years,—in how many instances they have gone like him, to solve the mystery of the future !

Mr. Herford was himself in the prime of his intellectual life, and in the richest period of moral and religious experience, when he came to Boston, being in his fifty-second year. He had been in the active ministry for more than thirty

* Installed Oct. 1, 1882.

years, having served four parishes,—three of them in England, his native land, and one of them in this country, the Church of the Messiah in Chicago, from which he came directly here. He was well equipped, therefore, for the task in hand, having tested his powers against adverse conditions, and knowing clearly what he wished to accomplish and what he felt himself fitted to achieve. He was rich in resources, and armed effectively with what many ministers so sadly lack; namely, a knowledge of the world of practical affairs and of human nature as it actually is. In his early life, before entering on the study and preparation for the ministry, he had been in business, and for four years served as a clerk in an English counting-room. This period in his early life he came to look back upon as one of peculiar value. “I have always counted it one of the blessings of my life,” he said in a sermon once, “that I was brought up to business.” He believed that in ways of drill and discipline he owed much to the training that he thus received. And such was undoubtedly the case, though no experience of the kind can ever be entirely devoid of danger. But, whatever the disadvantages, we can well believe that this early contact with practical affairs deepened and con-

firmed the natural directness of his mind, and gave him a very healthy hold on the things of life as they actually are. He once wrote,—and we could recognize the fact in his sermons, though he had never told us,—“There has always been a charm for me in taking note of the varieties of human labor, or in watching the workman at the commonest trade who is skilled in his craft. As I have stood looking on or gone in and out among the scenes in which the black and grimy toil of Sheffield is carried on, it has often happened that some simple process or some rough-and-ready craftsman’s term has struck across my mind, suggesting simple, telling illustrations of those grand old thoughts of God and Eternity, and right and wrong, which stir within our hearts, or were written in the Bible long ago.”

Let us look somewhat carefully at his characteristics as a man, which were also, as we soon must see, his characteristics as a preacher; for the two can never really be divided. The effective preacher embodies himself in every vital sermon that he brings his people; and his words are strong as he is strong, and weak as he falls short of moral energy or spiritual fibre.

We may fairly say of Mr. Herford, as some one wisely said of Browning, that “his *human*

nature was the strongest thing in him." He was a man of large endowment, with deep feelings, a warm heart, and natural and abundant sympathies. When he took you by the hand, you knew that he was interested in your welfare, and that, if you ever needed him, you could count on his assistance. He had, as all of us who knew him well can testify, a remarkable power of winning the confidence of people and learning their needs, and then of speaking the friendly word or doing the kindly act which lent comfort, light, and cheer. His general presence and influence may be best described as "fatherly." He seemed to take you up into the very abundance of his nature, and to fold you around with the warmth of genuine affection. Hence it was that young people in particular were attracted to him. He knew how to interest them, because he first of all was interested in them. They heard him gladly as he spoke in his sermons from the pulpit, because they could understand him, and because, too, of the very human element that formed the background of his every thought and word.

If we speak of more personal characteristics, it is certain that no man was ever much more free than he from vanity and affectation. He was contented to be simple, earnest, downright, sturdy. He had

none of the artificialities of social life, and none of the pretensions and self-assertions of popularity and power. You knew what he thought because he frankly told you, and his convictions were as manifest as his kindliness of spirit.

That he was possessed of deep emotions and impetuous impulses, against which he had to struggle forcibly and constantly, cannot well be doubted. He practised self-restraint. His will was strong; and he liked his own way best, as men of power almost always do. He had no fear of contention, and was bold in giving emphasis to differences of doctrinal belief. He was willing on occasion to force an issue, and could speak strong words in defence of his position. This came from the fact that he was a natural leader of men, and it was also due to the deep and vital nature of his faith. His religious beliefs were exceedingly dear and precious, and they found in him an ever ardent champion and defender.

It is well to remember in passing, for it throws strong light on the secret of his great success, that he was a steady and persistent *worker*, industrious, persevering, painstaking. He gave himself but scanty moments of real idleness, and even his days of seeming rest and recreation were

times of careful preparation. Two years ago in his Hampstead home he placed in my hands the journal that he had kept through the years of his Boston ministry. One entry in especial caught my eye, and has lingered in my memory. It was headed "*Vacation-Work*," and gave a list of the books to be studied and the tasks completed during the days and weeks of one particular summer. It is always thus, indeed, with those who achieve in life and who climb the heights of actual influence and power. The great men of the world have nearly always been great workers. Gladstone, as his brilliant biographer has but lately told us, would toil at his desk on occasions for thirteen, fourteen, even fifteen hours a day; and, when some public function stole away his precious evening hours, he would repair the lamentable breach "by working till four in the morning upon customs reform and budget plans of all kinds." Even so this faithful "minister in the Lord" would plan "vacation-work"; and it is safe to say that few men in the preaching profession have ever spent so many consecutive hours as he in the preparation of his weekly sermons.

And surely, as we look back now and measure the extent and nature of his influence, we can say

that working hours were seldom better or more nobly spent. How clearly we can see, how distinctly we can almost hear him, as he stood up in this pulpit to unfold the meaning and the mysteries of the religious life! His power as a preacher was unique. In certain respects—at least in the extent to which he carried one particular quality—I do not think I have ever known his equal. While he was lacking in certain dramatic elements, he excelled in plainness, directness, and simplicity of speech. He never rose on wings of rhetoric to what men understand as eloquence: his feet were firmly planted on the earth. But he did what was better: he called attention to the meaning and the glory of the things around us. He dignified the commonplace, interpreted the simple, and transfigured the evident and prosaic. He met his hearers where they were, and talked to them of things divine that compass each and all of us along the path of daily life. Thus he was helpful, suggestive, stimulating, and wondrously effective.

There were great preachers in Boston when Mr. Herford came here,—one of them the greatest living preacher of the day. The mighty Episcopalian whose torrent of spiritual thought bore people of all beliefs, and perhaps of no belief,

into a living consciousness of divine realities, was at the very summit of his noble and wonderful career. He had not then exchanged the mantle of the prophet for the robe and mitre of the bishop, and his church was crowded every Sunday to the doors. At the same time another, and a very different preacher, was holding the close attention of great throngs of eager and thoughtful people at the South End of the city. It was the purpose of this other prophet to reconstruct the basis of religious thought, and to unfold with masterly eloquence the higher implications of evolution and of scientific thought in general.

It would doubtless be idle to assert that Mr. Herford was the intellectual equal or the pulpit peer of either. Yet he was rich in certain forceful, telling qualities that made his influence almost, if not quite, as deep as theirs, and that gave him as strong a hold on people's hearts and minds. It is sufficient testimony to his power that he completely filled this church at two services each Sunday, and gave strength and inspiration to a steadily increasing multitude. He placed the church, indeed, in the very front rank of spiritual influence, and became himself a central force in the religious life of the community.

If we seek for the sources of his pulpit power,

it is evident that the preacher and the man were one. The strongest thing about him was his human nature. "The originality of his thought lay in its humanity, and the total impression of his work is an impression of humanity." He dealt with *life*,—life in the home and on the street, in the sphere of pleasure and the haunts of toil; life amid the embarrassment of riches and face to face with ugly want; life in seasons of discouragement and sorrow and life surrounded with the benefits and bounties of love and faith and peace. And his word was ever one of "courage and cheer."

Let us "make life," he once said, "what it has in it to be . . . Do a strong manly or womanly part; accept the mercies that come with a glad thankfulness; take hold of work and duty with a firm, hearty grip; in all life's intercourse, whether of home or in the busy world, fulfil a loving helpful part; and let your heart go out toward that greater life of God, out of which ours comes and which is with us always." *

For this reason he was always interesting to young as well as old, for life is the all-absorbing topic that never loses interest. On this account, also, his words sank in, and becoming rooted in

* *Courage and Cheer*, p. 234.

the memory grew and twined themselves around the pillars of the conscience and the porches of the mind. Who that heard it could ever forget his sermon on the "Perseverance of Sinners," or in hours of weakness and temptation could fail to bring to mind that the "Strength of character is the strength of the weakest part"? His sermons, therefore, were *real* sermons,—not essays, nor discourses, nor philosophical nor ethical disquisitions. He believed in being simple, practical, direct, and intelligible, so that the youngest even of his hearers could understand his meaning and take away some helpful truth. It always seemed as though he had young people in his mind as he wrote his sermons; but perhaps I feel so for the reason that I myself was young when I used to hear him with such profit in this place. The fact is that he understood one central secret of all successful public speaking: he addressed the individual. The crowded church was a unit in his mind; and he spoke to the person, whether old or young. In short, he knew, as he once said, that "simplicity is not the first grace of art, but the last and finest perfection of it."

Again, and hardly less important as a source of influence, was his utter honesty, and unqualified downrightness of expression. He not only

meant what he said, but he refrained from saying things which he did not wholly mean or believe. One of his greatest charms in the pulpit was his mental frankness and intellectual humility. He did not assume to be infallible; and he was contented to confess that the mysteries are great, while we see but a short way into them.

His thought concerned itself with *simplifying* the problems and perplexities of life, and not with attempting in dogmatic fashion to *explain* them. He was contented with that "practical wisdom" which freely confesses that "we are finite beings, surrounded by infinity, and every line of action, observation, thought, along which we try to work or look, soon edges off to heights and depths which our working cannot attain nor our thinking fathom." * Thus he modestly confined himself to the "small end of great problems," where he found a little circle of light within helpful reach. This was the more remarkable for one who was naturally positive and self-assertive, and it won the glad confidence of people who believed the more that he explained the less. There are many religious teachers who would build up greater faith in others if they claimed for themselves a less intimate acquaint-

* The Small End of Great Problems, p. 18.

tance with all the mysteries of inscrutable Providence and divine Omnipotence.

But more than all else it was true of Mr. Herford, and a secret of his deep and extensive influence, that he made religious life and thought a practical reality and a part of daily existence. As he gave the impression of living his religion out himself to the best of his ability, and with constant prayer and earnest application, so he made more evident to others the natural sacraments of love and hope, of duty, effort, aspiration, and desire. He had the faculty of making people understand that they often were religious when they did not know it. He understood that the unseen things are often the most real, that the heavenly world is near and actual; and he left in people's minds the need and the value of "patient continuance in well-doing." These were among the qualities, these the mental and spiritual powers, that contributed to make him "a faithful minister in the Lord."

Not even in this place, however, must we forget the larger parish that he served and the broader interests to which he lent his strength. What he accomplished for this church, indeed, can never be told in a few words or in many. Though his ministry was all too short, its in-

fluence has been long, and still extends itself. If he had done nothing else in the nine years that he labored here than to establish our Vesper Service, that in itself would have made his pastorate notable and his contribution permanent. But he did achieve much else, both for this church and for the religious cause he loved. He was distinctly an organizer and a manager, with the instincts and talents of a man of business for attending to details. All questions, whether of the music or the missionary work or the machinery of service, were given his careful oversight and keen attention. He made the Sunday-school especially effective, and he spared no pains to impress and influence the children and young people who came in any way within his reach.

These same qualities he exercised with unstinted energy and devotion in matters of denominational interest. Thus he made himself a leader in missionary enterprise while he distinctly helped to shape our Unitarian policy. He believed to an extent that others did not then, and do not now, in the value and spiritual efficacy of the Unitarian name and in the policy of the separate sect. In this respect he was the follower of Dr. Gannett rather than of Channing; for Channing believed more especially in "the community of free minds,"

and wished "to live under the open sky, in the broad light, looking far and wide."

Mr. Herford understood the value of organization. He believed that there was need for business enterprise in religion. Listless and half-hearted measures of missionary action challenged his zeal and aroused his faculties. He threw himself therefore with unstinted energy into the cause of Unitarian work, attending meetings, speaking at conferences, acting on committees, going with punctual regularity to all interesting as well as unimportant functions of denominational significance. It was wearying work ; but he never faltered, and the fruits of it are being reaped to-day in many a field where the hand that cast the seed has been forgotten.

There was poetical justice and divine fitness in having him give so much of his time and strength along these lines. The American Unitarian Association, which is our national organ for missionary purposes, was organized by a former minister of this church in 1825. And so this able successor of Dr. Gannett awakened new enthusiasm among the people in these pews, until the society became the largest annual contributor to Unitarian missionary objects. It was a triumph of devoted service and consecrated leader-

ship which was made possible by the loyalty and generosity of this members of this parish.

It would be a difficult matter to decide, however,—especially during the latter part of his ministry in Boston,—exactly where the limits of his parish ended. His pulpit powers were such that he had always gained a strong hold over young men. It was natural, therefore, that Harvard College should turn to him; and he was honored by being appointed one of the University preachers. The impression that he made upon the students was marked and characteristic. They enjoyed his directness and plainness of speech. His services were likewise appreciated by the authorities of the University; and Harvard, who is never careless in the bestowal of her honors, adopted him among her sons, conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Divinity.

Through all this time Mr. Herford was distinctly and avowedly conservative in his religious thought. Indeed, the cast of his mind was almost evangelical. He was a son of the Old World, where institutions are deeply rooted; and he loved with pathetic and contagious fervor old words, old expressions and interpretations. He was never reconciled to the new and reconstructive religious thinking of his day. The sense of his-

toric continuity was strong within him, and it is said that he described himself as "conservative without apology." Perhaps for that reason there was a tenderness, a fervor, a reality, a deep expressiveness about his faith that was often beautiful and touching. He had convictions, and not sentiments only; deep, heart-felt, life-wrought faiths, and not mere fluttering beliefs. Few men have had more courage, perseverance, or deep trust in things divine than he; and his trust survived the shocks of fortune and the deepest sorrows life can know, while it flowered with new beauty and devoutness in the soil of pain and loss.

And so the time approached when his ministry here, which was all too short, came sadly to a close. A call came from his mother country to a suburban church in London, and after a painful and protracted struggle between conscience and affections he finally resolved to go. Everything possible was done by members of the congregation to dissuade him from his purpose. The Prudential Committee brought all manner of pressure to bear upon him. The leading men of the parish came together, and besieged him with forceful and persuasive speech. The matter came to be considered one of im-

portance to the whole denomination,—as in truth it was,—and distinguished laymen from different parts of the country wrote and urged him to remain.

But it was all in vain. He felt that the need was greater there than here; that what he had learned of American ways and methods in denominational work might be made of particular help to the Unitarian cause in England. This feeling had begun to weigh with him even before he came to Boston, and he had frankly given expression to it. In his letter to the Prudential Committee, dated Chicago, April 24, 1882, when he accepted the call to Arlington Street, he had written these significant words: “In speaking of *permanence*, I have only one reservation to make; and that is of the possibility of a return to England. As to family relations, indeed, having now ties in this country also, I think Boston is as happy a location as I could choose. But sometimes, when I have thought of the burden which weighs down the English Dissenters, and of the harder fight which my English Unitarian brethren have to fight, there has come over me a misgiving whether I did right to run away from them. I do not know. I am hoping that the being able to visit my English

brethren more frequently may merge this feeling in the larger sense of its being one work we are all doing there and here ; but it is possible that the effect may be the other way, and that some day calls may come that I could not resist."

But in spite of these words of warning the strain, when it came, was none the less hard for him, and for the people who had learned to love him deeply, and were proud of his achievements and distinctions. It was a case of clear self-sacrifice upon his part, in which the financial element was not the least. He was giving up comfort, wide-spread confidence, and a position of unique importance to begin again a serious struggle against manifest difficulties. But the sense of duty overcame all other considerations, and he went. Ten years afterwards, in writing me, he described it as a "distracting call of Duty,—yes," he added in his letter, "not of pleasure or of profit, but I think of *duty*."

His strength was spared him for a decade nearly in the London work ; and there at home, among the people of his birth, he rounded out full fifty years of active service in his Master's cause. In the mean time he did not forget the people and the church that he had left behind. The letters that came back from the English work to

faithful friends, who had regretted most his going, were filled with expressions of affection and good will. "My heart is, as ever, with the old church," he wrote as recently as October, 1900, to the chairman of the Prudential Committee.

In the early autumn of 1899 I made my way to the Hampstead Chapel, and heard again the familiar voice in prayer and sermon. The church was full. Strong men sat there in the pews, and received with profit the helpful, earnest, candid words which always bespoke such personal faith and encouraged so directly honest, holy, faithful living. But the old-time vigor had departed. The strong and joyous hold on life had gone, and was never to return. The end already could be dimly seen, and from that time on he visibly approached it. The silver cord of energy was slowly loosened, until at last the golden bowl of consecration fell apart.

From all of this, however,—from the pain of parting and the sense of loss,—we turn back gladly and with tender, grateful reverence to the "faithful minister in the Lord" as we knew and loved him in this place. We have not lost him: we shall never lose him, for "our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them." Neither is he lost nor dead to this dear church

for which he did so much, and whose welfare never failed until the last to claim his interest and elicit his concern.

The work he did here will abide, and bear fruit in abundance through many an opening year. It is a permanent possession, a spiritual asset, a precious legacy. Loyalty to his memory on the part of the people of this church is the truest evidence they can hope to give of loyalty to others, to the cause of free and spiritual faith, and to that pure and undefiled religion which he made so real and beautiful.

And thus in him, the "faithful minister in the Lord," and through the lives of those he loved, the prophecy of old shall be fulfilled:—

"They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever."









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